

## John Hank's Story

John Nugent Hanks joined the CRB in 1946.

When interviewed by Dom Meadley, John recalled:

*"I was interviewed by the Chief Engineer, Deputy Chief Engineer and Alf Gawith which was par for the course in those days. I had been unemployed since graduating from Sydney University in December 1945 and was desperate to gain employment quickly. I had been offered a job with the Commonwealth Government in Canberra (then in its infancy) but I preferred to get a job in Melbourne. At the end of the interview, I asked the Chief Engineer when I would find out the result. On receiving the reply that it would take a number of weeks, I explained my situation and, much to their surprise, I asked for an immediate answer. They huddled together and they gave me the good news. I started the next week".*

Dom summarised John's career as follows:

"He was very much involved in concrete testing and mix design early in his career. When I arrived in 1965, he was responsible for designing pavements using the test results of gradings and PIs from the three PI labs on the ground floor at Kew. If the results did not correlate between PI and shrinkage, he was the one who ordered repeat testing from Bob Barron who was looking after the soils labs. Later he moved to 1st floor to manage the research, and he was very much involved in reviewing Standards Australia methods and was so pedantic. However, he did understand the need for validation of methods and any changes made using sound statistical techniques.

My first interaction with him was when I was preparing a paper for the concrete Institute with Barry Munce and Barry Russell. We needed to review if the concrete modulus of rupture test was suitable for quality control of continuously reinforced concrete pavements. He spent many hours with me and taught me a lot about statistical analysis and uncertainties when evaluating test methods. He was very much involved with Tom Horsfield and Peter Hillard in developing the first CRB testing manuals. He was also involved with Jim Holden in preparing annual reports of R&D and preparing research programs for annual budget requests."

It was amazing that the story was much the same when John reached the age of 65 and was forced to retire. He had to get his own way and was determined to achieve 45 years of service - a personal goal since he had achieved another goal in the Board, that of the longest serving person who had been employed as a graduate, it is thought. John claimed he had a number of tasks to complete prior to finally taking his leave. Bob Meggs, the newly appointed Manager Materials Technology Department, was at his wits' end as John's office was needed by other Departments. No matter how John was cajoled, Bob could not move him. It was not until some months later that Bob discovered that John was determined to achieve the 45 years - after which he reluctantly left. However, he still turned up each Tuesday to participate in tennis matches with his former colleagues at lunch time.

John was very frugal, but the stock market crash of 1987 caught him unawares. He took Bob Barron to task for organising a training course and visit to the regions at the time for his inattention to the market and subsequent paper losses.

John's long service with M.R.D. also had its disadvantages as many discovered his slight eccentricities which led to a few harmless practical jokes.

John was always a late starter, and even when he did sign on in his early career, he found it difficult to avoid the late-comers red line. Prior to the introduction of flexitime, he was not required to sign on, due to his classification. When flexi-clocks were introduced, John became a victim of his passion for numbers.

At the end of the day, when he decided to leave, he would pack his bags and head down to the flexi-clock to turn it off. He would wait at the clock until it clicked to a zero or a five on the last (second) decimal place of an hour. Others observed this and, one day, altered his clock so that there were two 1s instead of a zero. For a few weeks, John was convinced that his reactions were slow as he could never catch the zero. Did compassion finally come to the perpetrators of that dreadful deed?

He developed the habit of weighing himself each day and we often wondered if he purchased the platform scales for the experiments John Szendroe was carrying out or whether he needed it for his daily routine. Unfortunately for John, the scales were metric and each day he had to convert the metric values to stones and pounds. The concrete laboratory was in possession of a FACIT mechanical calculator which was the level of technology which John would tolerate. John would invade the concrete cylinder testing laboratory, right at its busiest time, to perform his daily calculations. Although we had electronic calculators for years, John would not use them. We finally forced his hand by hiding the FACIT - much to his disgust - John entered the electronic era. The basic calculator was as far as he got - thank goodness "a computer on every desk" arrived after his retirement.

The staff in the concrete laboratory periodically amused themselves by developing schemes to make the platform scales read differently by taping stones, washers, etc. to the base or the balance scale. They then punted on how long it would take John to discover the offending addition.

In 1988, when the platform scales were disposed of (they only had one use - weighing John), John decided to climb on to the CBR testing machine to weigh himself. This was quite a sight in itself - this tall gangling body climbing up on to the Shimadzu whilst avoiding the greasy drive threads. How did he convert kilonewtons to stones and pounds?

John was best known for his obsession with South Melbourne Football Club (later the Swans). No doubt he developed this allegiance when he first joined M.R.D. from Sydney and South Melbourne was in its prime. Beware of Mondays if South won. John would know every kick, handball, umpiring decision for and against and have his own opinions on best players, etc. The best way to avoid his Monday discussions was to pretend to know nothing about football or to barrack for Collingwood. In the late 1980s the Swans reached the finals and, when they lost, a sign was posted on his office door early on Monday morning, C'mon the 'Roys (Fitzroy had just beaten the Swans in a closely fought 1<sup>st</sup> semi final). John really flipped and tore the sign down immediately and proclaimed it was the most dastardly act anybody could do.

During the summer months, when he could not get the subject around to football and the Swans (or South Melbourne), John would seek out *The Age* Saturday crosswords addicts to discuss the previous solutions and the current crossword. These “addicts” often developed a habit on being “in the field” on Mondays, but they were not spared as John was a patient man and Tuesday or Wednesday was good enough.

John was not selfish with his knowledge, and I remember when I was battling with analyses of variance and other statistical matters that he spent many an hour with me going right back to statistical basics. The mind was spinning at the end of each session but he patiently explained those items I had missed out on during his previous discussions and went through them again. He had established himself as a bit of a guru on statistical matters relating to testing. This sometimes led to heated debate with others who disagreed with him.

John is well remembered for his pedantic editing and discussion of tests methods and Standards Australia documents. His command of the English language was remarkable, so much so that many of us would dive for the dictionary when out of his sight to discover the meaning of some word, previously unknown to us, only to find that it was the exact word for the situation.

John’s pedantic outlook was a blessing in most cases, but some might argue that in a few cases it may have held us back. Whatever is said about him, he was a very important part of the development of M.R.D.

John was an Australian Chess Champion and represented Australia in international competitions. He helped in establishing the CRB chess club and it was a challenge to play against him

John was an enthusiastic tennis player. He was also a line umpire in a number of Australian Open matches. He continued to play tennis and would play the likes of Barry Bromham David Veith and Rob Weatherson at lunchtime after he retired. Unfortunately, John would like to come back to MRD for a chat so we would need to be on the lookout to try to avoid him as the chats could be quite long.



John receiving a retirement gift from Chairman Ian Stoney



John Hanks’s retirement send-off. L to R: Colin Roy, David Currie, Bob Meggs, John, Peter Lowe, John Bethune, Keith Moody, John Scala